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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 004672

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PTER](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: IRAQI PRESIDENT TALABANI PROVIDES SECDEF SECURITY
RECOMMENDATIONS -- "IRAQI FORCES MUST BE IN THE LEAD"

REF: BAGHDAD 4426

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) Summary: President Jalal Talabani emphasized to Secretary of Defense Gates and the Ambassador December 20 his

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firm belief that Iraqi Security Forces should be on the frontlines of Iraq's internal conflict while Coalition Forces should be in a support role. He provided a list of recommendations for Baghdad security focused on unified leadership, the development of strong, non-sectarian Iraqi forces, improved checkpoints, the expansion of secure areas in Baghdad, and reliance on the Iraqi people to help find solutions for bringing down the violence. He agreed with Secretary Gates that the Jash al-Mahdi (JAM) militia

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represents a greater a threat to the Iraqi government at this time than AQI. He hoped the development of a moderate National Front coalition would give Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki the leeway he needed to attack the JAM and diminish the influence of Shia extremist and JAM leader Moqtada al-Sadr. Talabani said Iran had not reduced its support for militias in Iraq, despite promises from Iranian leaders during his recent trip to Teheran (reftel). He asked the US to continue urging other Arab countries to play a more constructive role in Iraq. End Summary.

TALABANI: A GOOD PLAN AND COOPERATION CAN SOLVE VIOLENCE

12. (S) President Talabani initiated the meeting with Defense Secretary Gates and the Ambassador by reiterating his

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appreciation to the US for liberating Iraq from dictatorship. He noted that Iraqis were also now able to experience the benefits of a free economy, and that some corners of the country are experiencing an economic resurgence. In addition, some groups that previously opposed the US in Iraq were now clearly on our side, including a number of sheikhs who were now leading efforts against terrorists as well as Sunnis who no longer see the US as an enemy. Talabani said he believed the violence that afflicted the country could be solved with a good plan and strong cooperation between the Iraqi government and the Coalition.

13. (S) Secretary Gates asked Talabani's views of the new plan for Baghdad security. Talabani said he had not seen the plan yet, but stressed the importance of good cooperation between the PM and CG Casey. He also reiterated that Iraqi forces

must be put in the lead, with CF providing support. Talabani asserted that as an Iraqi he was ashamed when he heard of U.S. soldiers being killed in Iraq; he firmly believed that it was time for Iraqi troops to shed more of their own blood for their country. He also worried about dependence by the IA on Coalition Forces. He firmly believed the IA should readmit the "thousands of good military officers" who served in Saddam's army but whose former positions would not compromise their ability to lead now. Secretary Gates said that Talabani and he agreed on the importance of having Iraqi forces in the lead. However, we have to be careful that we do not put those forces in a position where they will fail. He emphasized the importance of embedding coalition troops in Iraqi units, and of providing CF support to Iraqi troops on the front line. He agreed that ultimately Iraq will succeed when Iraqis who love their country are willing to fight and die for it.

IDEAS FOR BAGHDAD SECURITY; STRONG COMMAND, STRONG IRAQI FORCE

14. (S) Returning to the issue of security in Baghdad, Talabani handed Secretary Gates a document in Arabic (septel) he said outlined his basic ideas. First, he asserted, any security plan for Baghdad must include a strong central command of the forces of Iraq, capable of making decisions and sticking firmly with them. This leadership must be strong in facing the groups that challenged Iraq's security, primarily the AQI and the JAM. He called for the creation of a special force for Baghdad security -- with one uniform, the same weapons, and a common system of communication. Indeed, the best troops in the Iraqi Army (IA) should be deployed in Baghdad, where most was at stake. If Iraq forms National Guard forces in various parts of Iraq, Talabani called for recruitment on a non-sectarian, non-ethnic basis to ensure mixed units. He sought a strengthened and enlarged Republican Guard in less than seven months. He also emphasized the importance of explosives detection equipment, which Iraqis needed and had the resources to obtain. Baghdad

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must also have strong security checkpoints that criminals could no longer cross with ease, including at the Army Bridge crossing the Tigris. The President, Prime Minister, and Ministers should also move their activities and offices outside of the current International Zone (IZ), thereby increasing the size of the IZ when they redeploy their protective security forces to new locations in the red zone. An expanding IZ would give average Iraqis hope that the safe area of Baghdad was growing.

15. (S) Furthermore, in Talabani's view, the GOI and Coalition must depend on the Iraqi people to help find solutions to the nation's insecurity. He cited as an example the sheikhs who came out publicly in support of the Prime Minister the day after residents of Sadr City had thrown stones at the PM when he visited their area of Baghdad. Also critical was a non-partisan, non-sectarian source of information for all parties and members of the government. He noted that shortly after the liberation the parties used one central committee for distributing information and sharing developing news. The government should seek briefings from people within the militia groups, including in penetrating the JAM.

THE JAM IS GREATEST THREAT; MODERATE FRONT MAY HELP

16. (S) Talabani said he agreed with Secretary Gates that the JAM was a greater threat to the Iraqi government at this time than AQI. The JAM was comprised not only of militants loyal to Sadr, but also of Iranian elements, former Ba-athists, and criminals. It had become a critical threat to the unity of Iraq's Shia and more broadly a threat to Iraqi security. Talabani regretted that the JAM had become large and carried

out violence without punishment. "If we don't stop them now," he said, "they will become the Hezbollah of Iraq." Talabani said he preferred not to use the word "militia" when referring to the JAM and other groups. Rather, he thought the GOI should speak in terms of going after "those violating the law," a rubric under which the JAM clearly falls. Talabani believed the forces going after the "lawbreakers" in Iraq should be first and foremost Iraqis, with American troops behind them. Talabani acknowledged the Shia people had suffered, first under Saddam and then after liberation as a result of terrorist violence. They were patient, but now the militias had begun responding in revenge, indiscriminately killing innocent people. Talabani aimed for a situation in which Iraq's conflict was not between the Sunnis and Shia, but between the Iraqi people and the terrorists.

¶7. (S) Characterizing PM Maliki as ready to take on the JAM, Talabani expressed hope that the current discussions among five moderate political parties would produce a new National Front to support Maliki in this effort and in cleaning up the government. Only the Sunnis were hesitating in forming the front, perhaps encouraged by recommendations in the Iraq Study Group Report that led them to believe the US will back them. "We want him to understand that the front will support him and that it will not threaten him," he said. Talabani lamented that the United Iraqi Alliance often does not support the PM even when he makes good decisions. It was critical that Maliki be able to strengthen the government by choosing good ministers who carry out -- rather than obstruct -- the PM's program.

IRANIAN SUPPORT FOR TERROR AND MILITIAS CONTINUES UNABATED

¶8. (S) Talabani described Iran and Syria as the main sources of terror in Iraq. He noted that during his trip to Teheran, the Iranians openly acknowledged their interference. They promised to stop, but clearly they had not nor had they substantially used their influence to reduce Syrian support for terrorists. The Iranians also claimed the Saudis were trying to exert influence over Sadr, and the Iranians "want him back." Talabani noted a slight improvement in the tone of the Syrian media toward Iraq. Media in other Arab countries was less helpful, inciting Sunni-Shia violence. He described relations with the Saudis as good, although he said they support extremist groups in Iraq that kill Americans. Last week Turkey held a Sunni conference during which some participants called for a jihad against Shia -- such provocations were not helpful. Talabani asked the US to continue speaking to Iraq's Arab and Sunni brothers to play a constructive role in Iraq.

¶9. (C) The Defense Secretary expressed appreciation for

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President Talabani's leadership and views on the way forward. He looked forward to continued close collaboration with Talabani as we work together to bring down the violence and allow space for Iraqi democracy to flourish.
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